



Excellent Education for Everyone

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2

Testimony on the Special Review Assessment State Board of Education

1/09/07

Members of the State Board:

I come before you today to challenge you on what has become one of the state's most contentious education policies, the use and abuse of the Special Review Assessment (SRA). More importantly, I want to remind you of your actions in 2005, when this Board passed a resolution to eliminate the SRA, and took a definitive step in changing the way in which this state quantifies the success of its graduates, and the value of its high school diploma.

Over two years later, however, you are asked by Department of Education officials to rescind your decision in the absence of a plan to truly eliminate the SRA. You are asked to extend the window of opportunity granted two years ago—for at least another two years—while the Department crafts what it believes will be a compelling alternate route examination for students that fail one or both portions of the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) three times. In short, you are asked to let, at minimum, another 26,000 students, in addition to the roughly 26,000 who have taken the SRA since your first resolution, exit high schools across this state having taken an assessment that is fundamentally flawed in its delivery and scoring, and, more importantly, that is only made available after the three time failure of what Commissioner Davy describes as a “middle school level test.”

Make no mistake Board Members. You are being asked to maintain the status quo to cover up the inaction of the State Department of Education on this important issue. To give State and Local Departments of Education yet another opportunity to do what they have done in the two years since your first resolution, and that, Board Members, is “nothing.”

Advocates for the SRA have pressed that we must keep the alternate route in place because they believe the life outcomes of students who receive a high school diploma are better than those of students who don't, whether or not they are able to read it. E3, and our allies, reject this notion wholeheartedly. This naïve advocacy is steeped in the excuses that consistently characterize schools that fail this state's children, particularly in areas where the majority of the student population is African American or Hispanic.

Supporting the SRA because “Minority kids need this” does the worst kind of service to these children and, additionally, occludes the true reason why this Board should reaffirm its support of its 2005 resolution to eliminate the SRA.

SRA use, and abuse, are symptoms. And in many ways a discussion of SRA practices misses the real problem. The real “disease,” if you will, is the disproportionate failure of largely urban districts to embrace or implement substantive K-12 reforms that would ensure our seniors mastered the skills necessary to pass the “middle school level” HSPA. Consider that 13,000 to 15,000 students annually are, ostensibly, failing numerous book reports, quizzes, and exams, but being passed anyway in the absence of either accountability or reform in these districts and schools. Even SRA advocates, in the report *Loophole or Lifeline*, have stated that high failure rates on the math portion of the HSPA seem to indicate a lack of either quality math instruction, or math teachers, for these students. Yet nothing has been done to remedy this challenge. These same advocates also assert that the easy availability of the SRA likely drives up its use; yet another reason for this Board to reaffirm its initial resolution on the SRA’s elimination.

Failure of the HSPA is a clear, ringing testament to what these schools are *not* doing to adequately prepare our students. And this failure is only exacerbated by the easy availability of the SRA, and the rules governing how New Jersey’s graduation rates are calculated. Indeed, there is no requirement for the Department to indicate to either colleges or employers that students received their diplomas after being tracked into the SRA process following a three-time failure of the HSPA. And there is no asterisk attached to statements made by the Department of Education’s public relations machine when it chants, incessantly, about New Jersey’s highest in the nation graduation rate. More tragic are the assertions that New Jersey has the first and second highest graduation rates for African American and Hispanic students nationally, when those rates are inordinately subsidized by the SRA process.

You need look no further than today’s hearing—two years later—to understand that the Department will not “act” in a timely, accountable manner on this issue in the absence of substantial pressure, and as long as it is able to use the state’s inflated graduation rate as a shield to divert attention from the unanswered failures of primarily urban, largely minority K-12 systems.

The Department’s presentation on SRA redesign proffers that what this Board really wants is “an improved SRA.” It also seeks to rename the program and ensure students still have a “Second Chance,” even though the SRA, which is triggered after a three-time HSPA failure, really constitutes a fourth chance for a senior to demonstrate eighth-grade skills. I submit that this is exactly not what this Board wants. What you desire is for the problems of K-12—which the SRA covers up—to be fixed in a manner that respects the urgency of these problems, and which restores both the validity and transparency of the state’s graduation process with the media, the legislature, business leaders, and students. These groups have made their opinion clear.

In its piece *It’s the schools that fail the test*, the *Star-Ledger* asserted: “The use of the SRA is a manifestation of a bigger problem: failing school districts. Correcting that problem will eliminate the need for the SRA in all but the rarest situations.”

Assemblyman Joseph Cryan, who has twice introduced legislation to eliminate the SRA says: "The SRA is still abused and absolutely an invalid source of a high school diploma. I don't see how anybody who pays taxes in New Jersey can accept second best, and that's what this is."

Dana Egreczky, of the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce relays: "Our high school diploma doesn't mean anything to employers. It used to be a ticket to the middle class, but not anymore."

And most importantly, two former, and the current, Commissioners of Education have supported these positions, with Saul Cooperman stating: "...the situation of passing out diplomas to children who don't have the skills is duplicitous to the public and unfair to the students." And Commissioner Davy relaying: "The idea that 13,000 [students] couldn't pass what is the equivalent of a middle school-level test should be frightening to all of us." And William Librera making the salient point that: "It's time to get rid of [the SRA] and refocus our efforts on helping our kids pass [the HSPA]."

Now this same Department comes before you to ask you to extend the window for development of an alternative until 2010, or "as soon as possible," while the SRA is renamed to reduce controversy, and the students who continue to fail the HSPA receive the same diplomas as those who pass the exam outright. This, Members of the Board, is unacceptable.

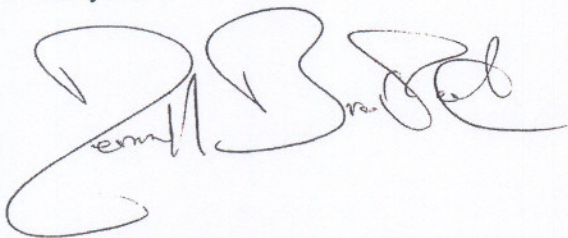
The presence of the SRA, and its abuse, undermines the value of the state's high school diploma. It masks the serious failure of many predominantly urban K-12 systems. It reduces community pressure for change. And it perpetuates a graduation myth that we all know, simply, is not true.

Leaving the SRA in place at the seven Newark high schools where between 63% and 93% of seniors cannot pass the HSPA, and at three-out-of-four high schools in Camden where between 60% and 80% of student students also fail the HSPA three times, will not fix what ails these schools. It will only allow those who oversee the failure to continue to spin a yarn to parents and students that they are somehow receiving a diploma that puts them on par with their suburban counterparts, and which establishes their viability in the workforce. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Members of the Board, I urge to draw a line in the sand and reject this resolution to rescind your earlier action on the SRA. At the very least, in the absence of a firm end to the program, New Jersey high school diplomas should be properly distinguished to indicate the use of an alternate route, and to restore the diploma's integrity for students who pass the HSPA. These tallies should be reported to parents, taxpayers, and the business community.

At the most, you should send a clear message to the Department of Education and the state's education workforce that public schools in New Jersey are about "education" and not simply "graduation." Nothing less than the future credibility of the state's public education system—the country's most expensive—the pressure necessary to make genuine K-12 change, and the life potential of over 13,000 students annually, hangs in the balance.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Derrell Bradford". The signature is stylized with large, sweeping loops and a cursive script.

Derrell Bradford
Deputy Director
Dir. Communications
E3

Additional Resources:

SRA Whitepaper

http://nje3.org/schoolwatch/giving_diplomas_meaning.pdf

SRA Podcast

http://www.nje3.org/thethirdrail/08.28.07_SRA.mp3

Stories and Op-Eds on SRA

<http://www.nje3.org/index.php?tag=sra>

<http://www.nje3.org/index.php?tag=special-review-assessment>

Former Commissioner Saul Cooperman's letter to the State Board on SRA elimination

http://nje3.org/schoolwatch/SRA_cooperman.pdf